Typical Fairbury Country School Design

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Early farming was very labor-intensive. Farm families were large, so the children could help with the farm work. The average farm size was less than 160 acres. With a one-mile square section of farmland, at least four farm families were required to cultivate those 640 acres.

The number of farm children in Livingston County peaked in 1900 at 6,000 students. This number of students led to establishing 299 country schools in Livingston County. Each of these schools averaged twenty students.

The Fairbury rural area included Avoca, Indian Grove, and Belle Prairie townships. Seventeen country schools were constructed to educate the children from these townships. Of these 17 country schools, only a handful are still standing. Spence Farms has a well-preserved country schoolhouse that was relocated there from a nearby location.

The Pearson country school, about half a mile east of the Avoca Cemetery, is still standing, but it is in deplorable condition. After the country schools closed around 1949, many of them were modified to make them into small houses or farm storage sheds. The Pearson school was converted into a storage shed for farm machinery. The wood floor was removed, and a concrete pad was poured as a new floor. A large doorway was cut into one side of the school, and sliding barn door-style doors were installed. Unfortunately, the doorway opening was not adequately supported after the doorway was cut. The wall and entire roof now sag into the doorway opening.

Because Pearson School does not have many years left before it collapses, a computer drawing of the school was prepared to preserve the history of that building. Measurements were made of each building component and the overall building dimensions.

The country schools in the Fairbury area were constructed using the local farmers as volunteer workers. The overall design of all the schools was similar in that these buildings had one large classroom with a small vestibule room attached. Since the classroom was a large room, these were often called one-room schoolhouses.

The specific design of each building varied according to who designed and built it. There was also variation in building materials depending on when the school was built.

The Pearson country school was one of the larger country schools in the area. It had one large room that measured thirty feet by twenty-four and a half feet. The primary classroom had 735 square feet of space. The small adjoined vestibule room measured

fourteen feet by ten feet or 140 square feet. The large classroom could comfortably seat 25 students. The maximum number of students was about 30 students.

The earliest country schools likely used stacked limestone rock foundations. They also used frame construction and wood siding boards. Roof materials probably varied over time. The earliest-built country schools likely used stacked boards or cedar wood shingles. Later, tin sheeting or asphalt shingles became available as roofing materials.

The Pearson school has a stacked limestone rock foundation. This foundation utilized locally available limestone rocks that were piled five layers high. The stone foundation is 12 inches tall and eight inches deep. Massive wood beams six inches wide and 10 inches high are on top of the foundation. These massive wood beams were notched to accept two-by-six-inch floor joists. The flooring material was wood.

Modern two by four's measure one and a half inches by three and a half inches instead of the nominal two inches by four inches. The wall studs on the Pearson schoolhouse are the older full-size two-by-fours. In homes built before about 1930, wood lathes were nailed to the wall studs, and then plaster was applied. At the Pearson schoolhouse, wood lathes were not used. Instead of wood lathes, unique three-inch wide boards were used. These particular boards had a dovetail-shaped notch, allowing the plaster to adhere better to the wood boards. Local experts believe these unique plaster boards became available around 1930. These boards indicate the Pearson schoolhouse was built sometime after 1930.

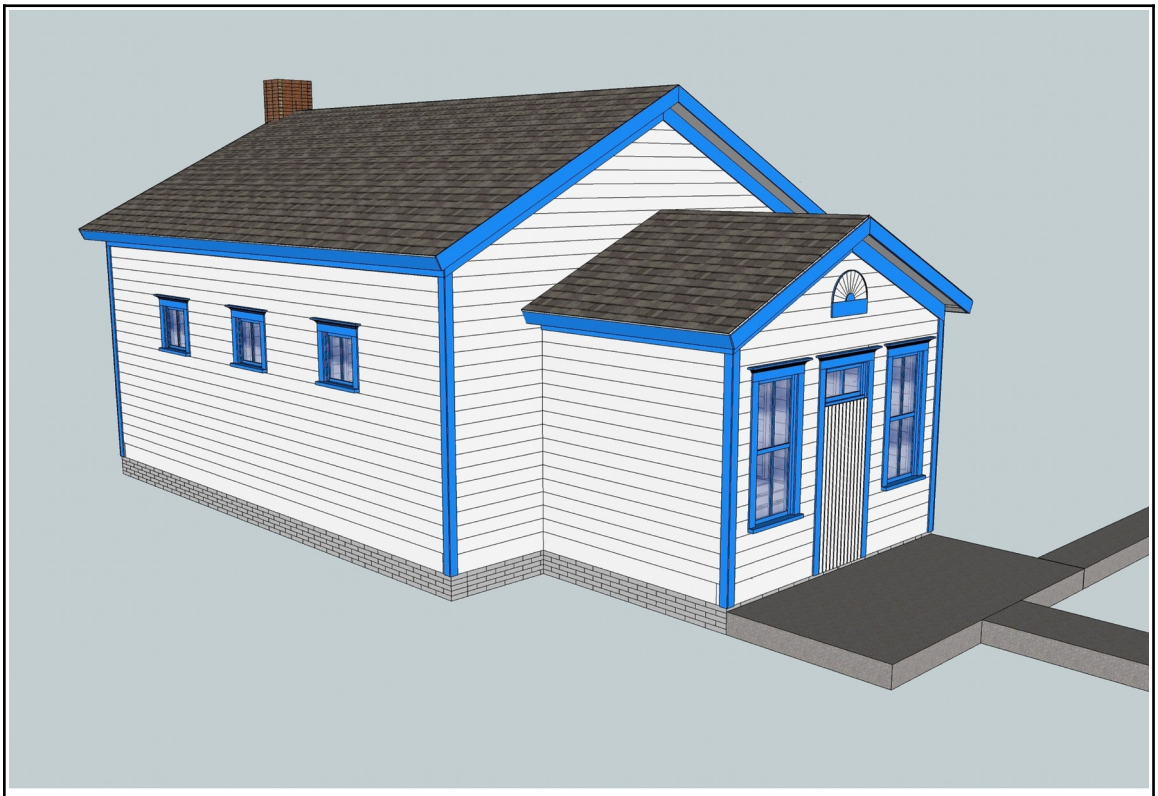
The plaster walls inside the primary Pearson school classroom are in excellent shape, except where the roof leaks dissolved all the plaster. As a decorative accent, 34-inch high vertical wood wainscoting boards were installed on all four walls. The front of the classroom had two giant blackboards. Each blackboard was 10 feet wide and about 40 inches tall.

Country schools had stoves to provide heat in the classroom. The Pearson school had a brick chimney for the stove combustion gases to exhaust from the school. There was no insulation in the walls or ceiling, so it was challenging to keep the classroom warm. The east and west walls of the school each had three large windows. The windows were high to allow the classroom as much sunlight as possible.

Country schools had wells to provide water for the students and teachers. The old well could not be found at the Pearson school site. Schools also had a small shed to store coal for the furnace. No remnants of this coal shed could be found at the Pearson school.

These schools also had outhouses. At some point, some country schools installed an indoor chemical toilet in the small vestibule room. At least two of the 17 Fairbury area country schools had this indoor chemical toilet. Pearson School had a chemical toilet. This toilet was a 24-inch diameter steel pipe that went down into the ground. Students quickly learned not to drop their pencils down the chemical toilet accidentally.

Although the Pearson country school will soon collapse and disappear, the computer drawing will forever preserve the design and appearance of this country school.



Computer drawing of Pearson Country School when it was in new condition.